



Interview No. SAS8.07.02

Ethel Ennis

Interviewer: Elizabeth Schaaf

Location: Baltimore, Maryland

Date: August 7, 2002

Q: Can you tell me your full name and tell me where and when you were born?

Ennis: My full name: Ethel Llewellyn Ennis. I was once Leeds and now I'm Arnett. I was born right here in Baltimore, the third floor of a row house on Calhoun Street, and that was November the 28th, 1932. And this was around Thanksgiving so I was my mother's turkey. [Laughter]

Q: Or early Christmas present. And your parents are Baltimoreans?

Ennis: Yes, well, my father was born in — he used to say that he was very proud of coming from Crown's Point, South Carolina — and my mother was born in Marian, South Carolina.

Q: And she came to Baltimore?

Ennis: Well, she came to Baltimore with her family rather early because I know she went to school here, and she was the oldest of three daughters at that point.

Q: Who gave you your given name, Ethel Llewellyn?

Ennis: Well, okay, my namesake mother and father: Ethel Wise who taught English at Douglass High School — we used to call her Big Ethel. I was born in her home. When I was talking about living on the third floor, she lived on the first and second floor of this building. And Llewellyn — I never met Llewellyn [W. Llewellyn Wilson] — but Llewellyn was also a teacher at Douglass. I think a music teacher, and I was told he was a very big man, tall in stature, but they say he was a fine musician.

Q: One of the best in Baltimore, and certainly a legend. Now we have two Llewellyn legends.

Ennis: I do like that Llewellyn! I don't use it often, but I do like the sound of Llewellyn. They tell me it's Welsh.

Q: All those consonants. [Laughter] Tell me a little bit about your grandmother.

Ennis: Well, we called Elizabeth Small Honey. We called her honey. Honey was rather religious — rather, very, very religious. She would speak of the people in the Bible as neighbors. You would think they lived around the corner or next door. But she was a very, very, strong woman. She said what she meant and meant what she said. She followed through on whatever she said. It's funny because in her fifties she left Baltimore to go to Glassboro, New Jersey, to build her home. And I mean really build the home, literally. She cleared the land herself, and it was so funny, after she got the structure up, she was making her doorways, and she couldn't get the mitered corners. And she said, how do you get those corners to match? So she prayed, and she said all of a sudden she had the right idea and the right way to do it. But she really built her home in Glassboro, New Jersey.

So she was too much. She was wonderful and I am really influenced by her.

Q: Well, taught by the Divine Carpenter. My goodness. [Laughter]

Ennis: Yes. Yes, you're right!

Q: Someone with experience.

Ennis: Right. Go to the source!

Q: She remained in New Jersey?

Ennis: Yes, until her death.

Q: But you stayed in close touch.

Ennis: Oh yes. I still keep in close touch, really.

Q: Well, I don't think grandmothers ever leave us. Tell me a little bit about your parents.

Ennis: Well, okay. Mama's name was Arrabell, Arrabell Sarah, and we used to call her Bell. Of course, I called her Mama. Mama was a musician as well. She played for the church. She was a pianist and organist, and she sang. Honey sang too with my mother at church.

My dad was also a churchgoer, and he sang and he played the harmonica. He was a barber. And Daddy's left leg was amputated when he was about twenty-six. So I never did see Daddy with two legs. When I came into the world, Daddy had one leg. It was kind of strange to see his prosthesis in the corner standing up there. [Laughter]. But anyway, he was a card. He was funny. Oh, he had humor! He had lots and lots of humor.

So it was a happy time, growing up.

Q: What kind of music did you hear at home?

Ennis: Religious.

Q: I mean, apart from church music.

Ennis: Religious and classical. Religious and classical, because we had to learn how to do something musically. And when I say we, my brother and I I remember not being able to be part of after school activities. We had to come home straight from school, and we had to learn how to clean, learn how to cook, learn how to sew, and practice our music. And piano lessons started at seven.

Q: Who did you study piano with?

Ennis: Well, that's funny because in the beginning I studied with my mother's teacher, and her name was Lovey G. Husketh. My mother taught me first. She started me off. That got to be a little too much for her so she sent me to her teacher. I studied with Mrs. Husketh for, oh, about seven years.

I really wanted to be a ballerina. I'd say, mother, I'm not going to take any more piano lessons, because I really want to be the world's greatest ballerina. She said, no, forget that. And my grandmother said, yeah, you're right. You will never get a job dancing on those black toes. [Laughter] So I never became a dancer.

Q: So we lost a great dancer.

Ennis: Yes. You certainly did. And you look at my figure now and you say, yes, never! But I just thought that was just so great, seeing the ballerinas just floating. I don't know, it was just the height of femininity, floating like a feather.

Q: Well, it would have been a different career.

Ennis: Oh yes. Well, it's so funny because being a singer, which I never thought I would be either, but that just happened. I never had coaching. I did have seven years of piano. But I never thought about singing.

Q: Well, those seven years were well spent because you undoubtedly eluded the stereotype of the singer who is not a musician.

Ennis: Yes, it does help. I'm happy for the happy for the times that my mother argued with me to practice and learn the piano, because it does mean a lot to me now.

Q: What was Mrs. Husketh like? I've heard so much about her.

Ennis: Oh really.

Q: She was so well regarded in the musical community. There was an article in the *Afro-American* about the great music teachers of Baltimore, and she was one of the people cited.

Ennis: Oh yes. I would imagine she was. It was so funny because I was still living on the west side of Baltimore, and she was living on the east side, and we, my aunt, who was two years older than I, were standing on the corner to go to Mrs. Husketh for our lesson — standing on the corner for the trolley. I guess we looked a little too small to be traveling alone, and a lot of the times the trolley would just pass us by. We would miss our lesson or be late, and, boy, Mrs. Husketh didn't like that too much. No, she would have her ruler there for the fingers. Yes, and she definitely knew when you didn't practice a lot. But she was rather stern, bless her. I mean, she had to have patience. I don't think I could have done it.

Q: So was she your only piano teacher?

Ennis: I studied with her for about seven years. Let me see, I started at seven, and around fifteen, that's when I started working with an all-male group in high school. So I just stopped around there.

Q: You went to Booker T. Washington?

Ennis: Yes, I did.

Q: And I think you got to meet one of the stars visiting the Royal Theater when you were a student there?

Ennis: Oh, was it Ella Fitzgerald? Right. Oh my goodness. You know, when you're so young you don't realize — isn't that something? I did get her autograph, and of course years later our paths crossed (we were in Canada) and we had pictures taken. And, you know, I never did get copies of them. And let's see, Ella. Oh my goodness.

I received a note from her through Keeter Betts who was her bass player for many years, and who lives in Washington. Since then, I found out that Ella says that I was her favorite singer. I found this out in '97.

Q: Well, what good taste she has.

Ennis: That's what I think. [Laughter] No, it's so funny for that to come. When I was in Booker T, I had to be around thirteen, maybe twelve — well, between twelve and thirteen. And years later, to see her in Canada, and for her to say those nice things about me (I think in *Downbeat* in the '60s — was it the '60s, maybe the '50s). I do have that. It was written that she's always liked my phrasing. It's just kind of neat to know that our spirits met so many years ago.

Q: When did you start making music just for fun? I mean you endured piano.

Ennis: I love the way you said that. Yes. I did. And then once in a while I would play pop tunes in the house, and then someone would hear it like "Honey - we hear that," and say "no, no, no, no, etudes and hymns."

Q: Don't waste the God given talent.

Ennis: Your exercises. Yes. And forget the blues. No. Never bring the blues home. They're so funny. So I used to play pop things. You know, buy sheet music and play them, and listen to records. At that time they're called race records or house records or something like that.

Q: Where did you used to go to buy your records and sheet music? I mean that whole scene has changed so much.

Ennis: Oh yes. Probably Howard Street. What was the name of that place? Walker's?

Q: That's right there was Walker's.

Ennis: I think that's where I used to go. Then later on at Hammond's down on—

was it Saratoga or Liberty? I'm getting all confused, but yes, it was Liberty, around the corner.

Q: There was a piano studio on -

Ennis: Yes, on Saratoga. [Laughter]

Q: Back in the days you could actually listen to the records before you decided you were going to buy them.

Ennis: Oh yeah.

Q: So you got together in high school with the group.

Ennis: Yes, and this was so funny because one of my classmates lived across the street. Well, okay, I'm living in the Gilmore homes. We moved into the Gilmore projects in '41. Brand new. We were just so happy to move there. Mother was a defense worker, she used to make gas masks. We were very happy to move into the Gilmore homes. And it was great then. It's a little different now. It has different, I guess you might say connotations. A neighbor by the name of Sylvester Coles used to play drums with this group. And it was called Abe Riley's octet, and he lived on Gilmore Street, and he said Ethel, they're looking for a piano player. And I said, oh I don't know about that because here I'm playing church music and my lessons, and they were trying to get into bebop. He said, well just come on and try it anyway.

So I did go to one of the rehearsals. Of course, having a girl with an all-male group was kind of different, and they said, well it might work. Well, the group was comprised of school kids, some in college, some married, and there was an older gentleman there, the guitarist, who made his own amplifiers, which we didn't appreciate on one of the gigs because Jack Benny's show was coming through the amplifier. [Laughter] We're hearing all this laughter and looking, and we're trying to play music and hearing all this laughter, and it was actually coming from his amplifier, his homemade amplifier.

So Mr. Bailey was the oldest.

Q: What was his first name?

Ennis: Fred Bailey. And then there was Elmo Tignor Douglas. How do you like that name? I think I have it right. And there was Johnnie Manning and Sylvester Cole. Abe Riley was the leader, he was the trumpet guy. So we made our little gigs around town, mostly on the outskirts of town where my age would not be questioned. Then one night, I think it was in Randallstown, I was asked about singing a song. The leader Abe Riley came to me and said, Ethel, do you know this particular song "In the Dark"? We got this tip here and we can keep the money if you know the song. I said, okay, I'll sing it. Oh good, good. So I start playing the piano and singing this song "In the Dark", and you can imagine me, around fifteen and sixteen, singing "In the dark, it's just you and I".

Well, I had heard that song from the lady downstairs, who lived downstairs. She used to have these weekend parties, and I used to be listening to all these blues and all. You know, these kind of sexy songs. But it worked out because they kept the money and all, and they split the tip. I was only making two dollars and fifty cents anyway.

Q: Well, that went a long way.

Ennis: Yes, in those days.

Q: Well, it doesn't sound like "In the Dark" would have been on Honey's approved list.

Ennis: Oh my goodness, no. No. No!

Q: Or your mother's.

Ennis: No. Well, she was a little more lenient. Honey was rather stern at times. But "In the Dark," no, I don't think she ever heard me do that.

Q: Well, you started getting some engagements at some places that I would have thought you would have had to do some explaining over.

Ennis: I guess you're right because I worked down on the Block at the Oasis, which was really, ooooh! Yeah, I was entertaining and singing songs on the piano and singing songs in between strippers. Yeah, you learn a lot about life in places like that. Wow!

Q: Graduate level.

Ennis: Yes. And I remember, well. I guess Honey felt that I could take care of myself, because I had the upbringing and that meant a whole lot to me and to her. She knew that I would be a lady wherever I would go. I remember putting on my first strapless gown to go out and perform. And she would say, Ethel, where's your undershirt, gal? I'd say, you don't wear an undershirt with a strapless gown! [Laughter]

She used to call them beer gardens. Oh, you're going to those beer gardens. And I'd say yeah. But I made her proud of me. I mean, she trusted me. That trust was wonderful. I guess I always had been aware of what would happen if I veered off the path — the right path.

Q: Well, you were at the Oasis and the Flamingo.

Ennis: Let me see. I did work the Flamingo. I think that and the Oasis are the only two places on the Block.

Q: Well people today forget that there was a lot of good music down there.

Ennis: On my goodness, yeah.

Q: There were people who went down there to listen to the music.

Ennis: That's true. I'm just trying to think, were we segregated at that time? Because we're talking about the late '40s and the early '50. Yeah, it was. I think my cousin was working down there. I had a couple of cousins. One female cousin was a cocktail drummer. She was working in one of the joints down there. And, oh, around the corner.

I had a lot of friends down there. We used to come out on breaks and commiserate and then go back.

Q: Mr. Roy McCoy worked for Kay's Show Bar while he was in the band at the Royal Theater. They let him leave early so he could go down and do his job at Kay's.

Ennis: Oh my goodness. I haven't heard that in a long. Kay's. Yes. Two O'Clock Club, Kay's, Flamingo, Oasis, Great White Way — I think that was on Gay Street.

Q: A lot of musicians worked down there.

Ennis: Oh yes.

Q: Including a bunch of Peabody people.

Ennis: Oh really? [Laughter]

Q: Well, they said it paid better than church jobs. [Laughter]

Ennis: True.

Q: Did you make your first recording with this group? Or, it wasn't with the Octet.

Ennis: Well, I did a recording — Henry O. Berman [recording studio] on Lombard Street. We did "Don't Ever Feel Blue", which was an original song written by a guy from Glen Burnie. Now I can't think of his name.

Q: Was that William Everhart?

Ennis: Yes, you're right. That was William Everhart. And let me see, the other song, we recorded, and that had to be in the early '50s. I guess that was my very first what you would call professional recording.

Q: What was the studio like? What was the atmosphere like at the recording studio on Lombard?

Ennis: Now I wish I could remember. Oh my God. I wish I could. I've seen oh so many studios since. But of course quiet, hushed. I don't think we took too many takes, but it was something I knew I liked. That's for sure. I wanted to do more of it. It was a wonderful insight.

Q: When was the next recording?

Ennis: I guess you would say that that had to be in '55. And that's when I went to New York. I did a lot of original material as well as some standards. And imagine doing thirteen tunes in three hours with musicians you never met before!

And they were marveling at Mother. She was with me, of course. And she's over there just crocheting, just being cool, cool mom. They would say, gee, Eth, look how composed she is. But that was a wonderful experience. That's where I first met Hank Jones, and Kenny Clark was on drums, Eddie Biggs, guitar, and Albert Hall on bass.

Q: And you're already a card carrying member of the Musicians Union by this time.

Ennis: Yes.

Q: What prompted you to join the Musicians Union?

Ennis: Well, other than it's something you should do.

Q: Well, other than. [Laughter] With most people, they hear about this job, they really want to do this, and so, oh my gosh, I better get into the union.

Ennis: I'm just trying to think. Did I go with anyone else? Because you hear the pros and cons about unions, right? So I just thought it was the right way to go at the time.

Q: Well, if you look at the difference in playing conditions.

Ennis: It does make a difference.

Q: Say thank you. [Laughter] I've spent a lot of time looking at orchestra schedules before the union got as strong as it is now.

Ennis: Uh huh. Uh huh. Okay.

Q: And the touring musicians —

Ennis: It does make a difference when you're traveling. It makes all the difference in the world. Yeah. And I guess that's the reason, I started to travel. I had all kinds of cards. You know, ADVA, and, of course, later on AFTRA.

Q: After you left, what happened to the Octet?

Ennis: I think it had to disband. Some of the members moved away, and, in fact, I think Tignor Douglas moved to the west coast to further his education (they tell me he's a physicist now). Is that close to music?

Q: Well, yeah. [Laughter]

Ennis: And, yes, I think I started traveling too. I was doing, I guess you might say duo work — just bass and keyboard — and then I joined up with another group.

Q: Who were you touring with as a duo?

Ennis: That was Montel Poulson on bass, who's still here. Then the two of us joined a group called Jo Jo's. Jo Jo Jones, guitarist. We would go up and down the eastern seaboard working. And let's see. Gee, Raymond Earl Katzenheimer was tenor player. I think he's still here, in the school system. He shortened his name to Ray Kitts.

Q: If you had to cite two people who had the most influence on you as a musician, who would you point to?

Ennis: Let me think. Two?

Q: Well, one. Let's start with one.

Ennis: Oh, I don't know. It has to be a zillion. Oh so many. Okay, you ask me again.

Q: Well, it could be more than one or two, but, I was wondering about the musicians who touched you most deeply.

Ennis: Well, of course, coming up, the women really meant a lot to me. To hear Hadda Brook, and she was a piano player and singer. Then there was Nellie Lutcher, who was piano and singer. There was Camille Howard who was piano and singer, and Rose Murphy, piano and singer. So I just admired them a whole lot. And I loved the sound of Peggy Lee. I loved the sound of Doris Day. Of course Ella and Sarah, Carmen [McRae] and, later in life, Billie Holiday when she lost her voice, because she painted the words so that you could actually see and feel because the voice was gone. But she could express the words.

Q: Yeah, she really could make every word alive.

Ennis: So delivery was her strong point, I felt after, the voice was gone. Delivery of words. I'd become very aware of lyrics.

Q: After leaving the Octets and doing the touring, you had a local sensation on a talent show here in town on WAAM.

Ennis: Oh yes. WAAM, Channel 13. It was a local talent show. If you became a winner, you go on to Philadelphia for the Paul Whiteman show. And I did go to Philadelphia, and I think I sang "My Mother's Eyes", [sings "One bright and..."] And something in that song I couldn't deal with, and it just got me so befuddled. Anyway, I performed, and I didn't become a winner. I always remember that their applause meter was not properly working. As a matter of fact, it was being worked manually. I said, oh I know I'm not going to win now. [Laughter] Yeah, so I didn't. It was a funny experience. But you can't say bad because, you know, what's bad is good on the other side.

Q: And then there was the Apollo?

Ennis: Oh the Apollo! Yeah, the work house. [Laughter] You see yourself going on and on. Go on, go off, go on, go off.

Q: What was it like going out on the stage of the Apollo for the first time?

Ennis: Well, it seemed as though I shouldn't have been there. I'm up there singing my cool jazz, and no, no, no. These people didn't want to hear that too much. I think his name was Shipman. He said you've got to get up there and do something with a real up tempo. So I said, oh boy, I got to change up here. I got to get someone to write me a track for the big band real quick.

So I came up with a blues: "You Got to Drive, Daddy, Drive", or baby drive or something. And that went over real well. I said, oh boy, this is not for me. Oh no! And then I went back again, and I think it was a better experience. But the Apollo is what it is. I think I was booked with the wrong group. The whole roster was kind of strange. This was the first time you had the Midnighters and some other groups.

But the second time I was booked with Horace Silver, and I think Cab Calloway was the house band.

Q: Well, and you got to work with Calloway? What was that like?

Ennis: That was fine. You know, it's kind of funny to think about it, because I'm not what you call an entertainer. I call myself an entertainer. Maybe I'm an infotainer. I don't hang out. I do my job and go to my room. [Laughter] But he was fine. Speaking of names like that, I feel the same way about Duke Ellington. He was just fine with me, he was a gentleman, but they tell me he was something else. [Laughter]

Q: Well, Calloway was an earlier Douglass person. We somehow jumped from junior high school over to the Apollo. But what was Douglass like when you were there? It's always had a strong musical tradition.

Ennis: Remember I told you, after school, come straight home. No after school activities.

Q: No chorus?

Ennis: No.

Q: Oh, my goodness. It seems amazing that you could have slipped out of that. Well, what was the next big step after you did the Apollo appearances?

Ennis: Well, the Apollo appearances happened after my tour with Benny Goodman, and this was in '58.

Q: Now, how did Mr. Goodman come into your life?

Ennis: How did he do that? I was recording then. Okay, this was '57, '58. I was recording with Capitol. Okay, the photographer who was there taking shots for the album cover was once Benny Goodman's band boy. And he said Benny Goodman is looking for a female vocalist to tour Europe with, and I think you would be just fine if you auditioned.

So I told George Fox, who was my manager, what this guy had mentioned to me. He said call this guy, the photographer — Pops. And he said, okay, we'll set up an appointment and see what comes of it. So I did audition while Benny Goodman was sitting there in his office. I accompanied myself on "I'll Take Romance". He looked at me and smiled. Didn't say a word, just smiled. He always did a lot of smiling. I left, came back to Baltimore. This was in New York. Came back to Baltimore, working at the Red Fox, and two weeks later I get this telegram to come in for rehearsal for the European tour.

So everybody's all excited. I'm okay. I'm just thinking, you know, this happens to people. You audition, you get a job and go to Europe. [Laughter] So everybody's all excited about this. Okay. So I did go to New York, and rehearsed and rehearsed. That's where I met Jimmie Rushing. Oh, I met wonderful musicians: Zoot Simms, Willie Dennis, Tap Jordan, and Evie Perry and Sylvan Howell. Oh my goodness! Some of them have made their transition already.

I guess it was maybe two weeks of rehearsals, it might have been more. Anyway, it was a spring tour, and our first stop was in Stockholm. We went practically everywhere — in Germany, in Norway, and we ended up at Brussels World Fair.

Q: What were the crowds like?

Ennis: Wonderful. Great. Just marvelous. They loved it. And I do remember we were in Berlin, in this arena with maybe nine thousand people at that time. Well, between nine and twelve thousand people. Who knows! Anyway, dear heart Benny Goodman decides to do a song we

hadn't done throughout the whole tour, and then he wanted the verse. I said, oh my goodness, I could not remember the verse to the song. Oh I said, what am I going to do? So he said now we're going to do "My Old Flame" tonight. So when it was time to call in Ethel Ennis — Yay. [Ms. Ennis makes clapping noise.] — and he started the song. The band was playing, and he looked over, bowed to me with his clarinet for me to come in with the verse, and I stood there in front of this microphone, and [Ms. Ennis pantomimes].

Q: Pantomime.

Ennis: And the technicians are running around pulling plugs, and wondering what's going on. They were in a tizzy. And so when it got to the part I knew. [Miss Ennis sings] "My Old Flame". And everybody just breathed a sigh of. [Laughter] Oh, it was so funny. Oh my goodness, because I had to do something! I did not know the words to that song!

Q: That was very clever.

Ennis: That was very bad because I'm always prepared, always prepared after that.

Q: You know, I have always wondered, and you're talking about walking out into a hall where there are nine thousand people — I've seen you perform, I don't know how many times, from the Red Fox —

Ennis: Oh my goodness.

Q: One of the bass players at Peabody had gone down and heard you there, and came back and told all of us about it. I remember calling the Red Fox the next day saying there is a group of us here at Peabody, and we would like to come down to the Red Fox tonight, but I just thought I should let you know that we are all white, and wanted to find out if that is going to be a problem for you. I could tell he was just breaking up on the phone. Then he said, honey, we invented integration down here. So we all went. And you were there, and it was just great. And we kept coming back, and it was just always great.

Ennis: At that time I think there were only two in the town that were practicing integration: Chick's on Green Street and the Red Fox.

Q: My goodness they had some great music. But I will never forget hearing you there. It was just wonderful. You have this wonderful talent. You walk out on a stage, and in two seconds you have the whole audience right in your hand. I mean, you just come out and you scoop them up, and there you have them, and you don't let them go until you leave that stage. And then they don't want you to go. How do you do that?

Ennis: I don't know because I was at the piano for so many years. Oh, I guess it had to be in the early '60s, around '63, '64, the manager that I met in New York, Jerry Purcell, said I must get away from the piano. It's a crutch. You got to stand up. And it was like leaving a nice, fuzzy, warm friend. I had to leave it and be in front of people and look at them, and try to portray and project and all that.

So he did hire a choreographer for me, and that did not work at all. Because I'm supposed to hit the hips, and move this shoulder on a certain phrase, and it was just very awkward for me. I couldn't remember all that. So I guess I did maybe two lessons, and that stopped immediately. So I guess I just started learning to be myself on stage. Sometimes it's embarrassing. [Laughter] But I'm forgiven. I did a lot of work in the great northwest with a group, and I think that's when I started developing the Ethel of today.

Q: It is hard work being a performer. It's lovely to go to Norway and to Brussels, but there are the hotels, being away from your family, I mean it's, it really is a sacrifice in so many ways, and really tough, really hard work.

Ennis: Well, at that time we're talking about the '60s. I was glad to be away from home. I was glad to be away from that husband. [Laughter] Oh my goodness! Yes. So that was wonderful.

Yes, the hotels and different languages, different foods. I mean, it's wonderful! It's really great! You're learning a lot by traveling, and, of course, I kept in touch with the family, and they were delighted I was doing well. I guess they felt that they had done their job well with me for everything to work out fine.

No, some people dread the road life, but I never did so much of it that it became a negative. Now some people are forced to go out and that's the only way they're going to make their living. But I guess I never had this burning ambition. I had determination, but I don't have a burning ambition to be out there. I guess that's the book that Sally [Kravetz] wrote, "The Reluctant Jazz Star". I'm just reluctant in so many ways. I used to get angry with her about that. What do you mean reluctant? I'm doing it, I'm doing it! Say, yeah, but you're not doing it all. Well, I don't do it till it hurts me.

Q: Well, there is having a life.

Ennis: Yes, and that's what I really believe in. I believe in living something other than what you're doing, so that when you do it you'll have something to bring to it. Living, how do you explain that? I just wanted to be more than — well, I want to be many dimensions. You know, I just didn't want them to say, oh, you're a singer. You're a singer and that's it. No. No. No. I want to do other things.

I love art. I love to draw and paint and cook and sew.

Q: It's a full life.

Ennis: Yes! As full as I can make it. The other things I want to do, I love just as much. I try to bring that same amount of energy to all the things I do.

Q: A husband cropped up all of a sudden. [Laughter] Where did you find him?

Ennis: My first husband, oh in '57.

Q: '57 was a busy year. How did you have time?

Ennis: Right. Yes, and it's so funny because I married in the fall, just about winter time. It was November of '57, and then, in '58, that's when I went to Europe, in the spring. I guess that was the beginning of working nine months on the road. After that tour, things start moving of course. Things get a little more hectic and more traveling. I did that maybe for two or three years.

Q: Do you think being on the road was a burden on your marriage?

Ennis: No. [Laughter] Yeah, right. Well, this will have to be in the film — one of these days.

Q: Well, I know a lot of musicians, and it's not at all uncommon, especially for women, because there are a lot of demands being put on them, and they have this career. You need to give a lot of yourself to that career, and sometimes there's a limit how much you can give of yourself.

Ennis: Well, I tell you, that's true. Okay, I can give you an example. I was working maybe six months or nine months in New York at a place called The Toast. On my day off, I would come back to Baltimore and cook up the food for him for the week and wash and iron and everything for him for the week. I did that on my day off. Go back, and work the six days and come back — I did that the whole time I was in New York. Now that was taxing — to work six nights from eight-thirty to quarter to four.

Q: And then do a week's housework.

Ennis: And then come back — but no, it was other problems. Now, when I look back on it, to have competition in a marriage is no fun. And that's what it was.

Q: Let's see, you had an RCA recording contract. When did you leave Capitol?

Ennis: I think Capitol left me. I think I recorded two albums. I think the first one was "Change of Scenery", which was kind of funny, you know. They had a white model. I can understand why they did that. I mean this is America. They wanted to sell albums. But they did use my likeness on the second one, and it was called "Have You Forgotten." And so I guess I left them in '58, '59. And I'm trying to think, did anything happen before RCA — in between there? Because I was with Atlantic Company for a short while, and I think I did a single. I'm trying to remember, was it in between the Capitol and RCA? It might have been.

So I know I signed with RCA. I think it was '62, '63.

Q: Was that around the time you were involved with the Newport Jazz Festival?

Ennis: Yes.

Q: What an exciting time to be there.

Ennis: Well, that was very exciting. That's where I met Billy Taylor, Dr. Billy Taylor and Cozy Coles was on drums and Slam Stewart was on bass. Oh my goodness! And it was written that I was the gem of the afternoon, and that's why RCA wanted me. It's hard to repeat what you've done, but they wanted me to do what I did at the Festival. And it's never going to be the same. I mean, it's altogether different. You've got a live audience, you've got all this excitement, and then you're gonna try to do this in a studio. Forget it. With other musicians!

Well anyway, they said we'll try to do a kind of small jazz thing (because they were doing a lot of big ensembles). So they said, we'll break it down, and I used some of the musicians from here for that last recording which was "Eyes for You" and that's E Y E S.

Yes. I think with Walter Namuth, Jimmy Wells. I'm trying to think — and O.C. Johnson, that was the New York drummer.

Q: Jimmie Wells is a wonderful musician, isn't he?

Ennis: Which reminds me, Jimmy said, Ethel, when you going to send me a copy? I can't find mine. I have to make a copy for him.

Q: So then there was this place called the Red Onion.

Ennis: Oh, in Aspen [Colorado]. Yeah. That's funny — the Red Fox, the Red Onion. Put all these reds together. [Laughter]

Q: What brought you to Aspen?

Ennis: I was working in L.A. on La Cienega at a club called Slate Brothers and I was on the bill with Peter Barbutti. His manager heard me and thought I would do well in Aspen. Of course, Pete was a regular there. Sometimes twice a year you would go for a long stay — like four to six weeks.

My first time going to Aspen, I thought I was in another world. Oh, it was just so wonderful. No stop lights. [Laughter] It was cold, but it was warm. You know, the sun is so warm, and the air is so wonderful, and the people just so great. It's quite different today.

Q: They did get that stop light.

Ennis: Yes. They did.

Q: And a few more.

Ennis: They did. Oh man. Yeah, it was so funny because I think it was more dogs than people there. But it was just a wonderful experience, and I loved it so much that Earl [Arnett] and I got married there.

Q: How did you meet him?

Ennis: Well, Earl was at that time a police reporter with “The Sun” when we first met. He used to come to the Red Fox after his gig, before he went home, and listen to the music. He’d always say, I wonder what a person like this, a girl like this, is singing in a joint like this. You know, that kind of thing. And he said it’s worth a story.

Once in a while he used to write features for the Morning Sun. Well, he asked me for an interview, and I said, okay. He came to the house, and I had forgotten or something and we made up another appointment. This seemed like it was in March. He would call and, as my neighbor says, gee, you must be an encyclopedia, this guy is talking and talking. What kind of interview is this?

Incidentally, it never appeared in the paper.

Q: Listen, it’s a great gambit! You’ve got to give him credit. [Laughter]

Ennis: And he kept all I told him to himself and married me instead. [Laughter]

Q: It must have been a great story.

Ennis: Yes. Because we only had one date. And like I said, we met in March. I guess you might say we honeymooned in June and got married in August. He met me out in LA, and I was so surprised to see him. Oh my God, this guy’s serious! [Laughter]

Q: So where did you get married?

Ennis: In Aspen. In Aspen in the Court House. The owner of the club gave me away, and the witnesses were the musicians that were working there.

Q: Well, you have worked with some really interesting people. I couldn’t help but think about the similarities between you and Charlie Byrd.

Ennis: Really?

Q: Yeah, because Charlie, like you, had this vast band of adoring people who loved his jazz, loved his music, and he could have knocked himself out on the road and probably have had an even bigger audience, but really kept that balance. He too liked to cook, liked his sailboat, and liked his home in Annapolis, and liked having a life and really kept control of his career. He could walk to work.

Ennis: Right. And that’s so meaningful, I think. When I look at some of the younger performers today, they’ve got an entourage to keep the fans away. They just can’t be people. And this is one of the things that I remember about Elvis Presley. I think about him — I say gee whiz, he had the world and couldn’t live in it. Now that’s too much marketing. That’s too much publicity.

Q: But it’s tough keeping the reins on it.

Ennis: Well, it's work.

Q: And he did that very successfully, and you are doing it very successfully.

Ennis: I spoke to Charlie when he wasn't well. And I said, Charlie, what is it with you? We're supposed to work together and you decided to get sick on me. He said, Ethel, you're so hard to work with. [Laughter] I love his sense of humor. He was so funny. We worked quite a few things together, you know, put some things together. He's always been a delight.

Q: I regret that I never had heard the two of you together, because both of you make such wonderful music, and what a pair, what a wonderful pairing that must have been.

Ennis: Well, there's a couple of things down at the Maryland Inn I know about. We have shots. And then we did some things on TV at Christmastime. I'm quite sure that those tapes are gone. And we did a concert in Delaware, and I do have the tape of it.

Q: Oh, I never asked you about 1973 and the Inaugural.

Ennis: Ooooh. Yes. I think it's. Okay we started, we were in Florida the year before at the convention in Florida, and were asked. How did that come about? Okay. Phone call comes into the house, and I answer. And the voice on the other end of the line says will you hold on for the Vice President. And I said, um, Earl, somebody's playing games. I gave Earl the phone, and he said hello. Will you hold on for the Vice President. Because I did ask her the Vice President of what, and she did say of these United States, and I didn't believe it. So Earl took the message, and it actually was from [Spiro T.] Agnew. So he wanted me to sing the anthem at the convention in Florida. I had no idea that he was a fan. And it was so funny, because he didn't even know I was from Maryland.

So anyhow, we all got together, and you know we had to be screened and all that before we even passed through anything. We were screened, and we went down to Florida. We were part of the gala affair, and I'm singing the anthem. It's so funny because the technicians, the audio people, recognized who I was. They said, hey, that's Ethel! Let's turn her up! These were the guys from the Arthur Godfrey Show in New York. So that was wild. You never know. Life is so full of funny things.

Q: Like my grandmother said, you better behave yourself. You don't know who you're gonna run into.

Ennis: That's true. And always have clean underwear cause you never know when you might have an accident. [Laughter]

Q: The grandmother's admonition.

Ennis: And she always told me keep pins. You never know, safety pins, always keep safety pins.

Q: I remember seeing that photograph of you in your book, and I thought my goodness she doesn't look like a Republican!

Ennis: Oh, that was something! I pondered on that. I called all the political leaders I knew. Here I am, a Democrat, singing for the [Republicans]. But you're singing for the people. Forget labels. The labels came later. We're people first. So I convinced myself that's the way to go. I did sing the anthem, and then I sang it at the convention. Then they asked me to sing it for the re-inauguration. I did it that way — a capella, and next, I have to do something else a little different. That's when I put the extra notes in that everybody's using today. I used to listen to the anthem at the end of the TV night (of course, we have twenty-four, seven now — they don't go off). I used to listen to the anthem each night, and I'd think, it needs another note. [Miss Ennis hums "from the land of the free"] And I'd think [sings higher note]. And I said that "free" — we need more free. [Laughter] I said we Black folks need a little more free. And that's why I added that extra note, you know, Yes. So I said, okay, we're going to do this.

My grandmother saw that, and she said, oh Ethel, I was so proud of you. She said to have the flag and the blue sky and you were singing. She was proud of me.

It was funny to see and experience, too, because it was very cold. It was very. And it was January twenty-one.

Q: And you had your little fur hat.

Ennis: Yes, I had the little fur hat. Well, not real fur. I started to sing because everybody's preparing to leave. This was as they go to their cars or wherever they go. I saw the backs of heads. Then I said, usually you're gonna have the Marine Band to accompany you. Well, I just had the Almighty, the microphone, and cold and a voice. They heard nothing but the voice, and then you could see heads turn, and that made a difference. A lot of folks didn't like it, and then some folks did.

Q: Really?

Ennis: Oh right. Because it was different, that's all. How dare you?

Q: Slide that one note in? [Laughter]

Ennis: Yes.

Q: Well, at that point people weren't used to hearing a singer do that accapella.

Ennis: That's right. It was quiet. This was Vietnam war time, and America to me needed to be cradled. That's why I slowed it down. Afterwards, a lot of the judges, Supreme Bench, came to me and said they had never heard the words before.

And that's what we have to do anyway, slow down. We're moving so fast in so many ways. So I just lullabied the old pub song.

Q: Oh, what a great thing to do.

Ennis: Well, it's wonderful to know that you can do it. A lot of folks won't like it, but some will, and you did it.

Q: Well it was the perfect thing for that time. And it's the perfect thing for our time right now, perhaps even more so.

Ennis: More so. More so. Because if we don't change our direction, we're going to end up where we're headed.

Q: I wonder how much people think about what goes on outside of us and how much that has to do with music.

Ennis: Yes. That's my ministry — the things I want to say before I close my eyes for the last time. I just want to do musically what I have learned and what's worked for me. What's good for me probably would be good for you too, because usually you're thinking of everyone. Because we're all one, really. I just want to record the things I've had on my list for a long, long time, so I can just smile in my sleep forever. My forever sleep. So that's what I'm working on. That's the project I'm working on.

Yes, thinking about the children and thinking about — oh just thinking about this world, and that's one of the songs. It was written by a woman. I've had it since 1970, oh '73, something like that. I performed it with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. I do have the big chart for that. I did it recently in Italy in Saluzzo with the chamber orchestra. And that was fun to do. That was just a couple of months ago.

Q: Tell me about that trip. You were just getting ready to go when I talked to you.

Ennis: Well, it was a strange. It was wonderful. It was strange and wonderful because Earl and I arrived way before everyone else, and Saluzzo, which is an old, old city, but clean. Like me. [Laughter] Well, people didn't speak much English, and we were, oh my goodness! We arrived at the hotel, and the woman, the grandmother, we found out didn't speak English. There was one man there, just kind of slumped over a table, and there was a bar, and here we are with our luggage wondering what we're supposed to do. Someone else came in and said, oh, you here with the bicycles. I said, bicycles? There was a cyclist race going on and they thought we were here with that. No, no, no, we're from the college, St. Mary's College in Maryland. Oh, oh, oh. That's when we were well taken care of, and taken to our room, which was delightful. Well, everything was just wonderful.

So we were there trying to figure out how we were going to order our food. [Laughter] But the grandson came in and spoke English, and we were so happy to see him. He took care of us the whole time we were there. We learned a little Italian, and they learned a little of our English. But it was delightful. The weather was wonderful, the city was — I couldn't believe how clean.

I just think Saluzzo was a wonderful introduction to Italy for me. I would love to go back. That was wine country. Don't forget that.

Q: The whole country is wine country. It's great. [Laughter]

Ennis: Right. You wake up in the morning — you want red or white? [Laughter]

Q: So how were the performances?

Ennis: Well, that was the funny part, too, because we didn't know where we were going to actually perform until the day before. We were going to perform in a cathedral, and they said no, no, no, you can't have that kind of music here. Oh, we went through all that, and, oh geez! So we ended up in a wonderful church which is being renovated, which was built in 1583. Absolutely gorgeous. It was small, but it was just wonderful.

I performed with a string quartet and a bassoon and two basses, trumpet, piano. How do like that?

Q: That's great. Sounds wonderful. So did they record the performances?

Ennis: I think they did. Yes, they did. We're waiting to hear what came out of it. What can be salvaged. I'm really anxious to hear the song I mentioned to you, "This World," because it worked. I took music over there for twenty-five. We ended up with what I told you — it was not twenty-five. And I'm anxious to hear, when it was broken down like that, how it would sound. The words are wonderful. You can do it live with just piano — maybe a capella is still the way.

Stefan Palmier, the daughter of Remo Palmier (who used to be the guitarist with Arthur Godfrey show) wrote this wonderful song called "This World". It's absolutely wonderful. It is so great, and like I said, I've been singing the song since '73.

Q: So this will be the next, the next recording out?

Ennis: I hope so. That's the one I want to do, and some of my things I want to do.

Q: When do you think that will be released?

Ennis: Oh no, no! Don't even start. Let me get it on there first. Let me get it started. Just so it's released before I'm released. [Laughter]

Q: Well, from the looks of things, I think we shouldn't have to worry about that for the next couple of decades. [Laughter]

Ennis: Well, I did put my order in for at least a hundred and twenty years in good health. That's what I put my order in for!

Q: So this album is already in line. When you've got a project that far along, I know you're always thinking about the one after that. So what is the one after that?

Ennis: The one after that? Elizabeth, I don't know. You know, I don't care after that. When I get the tunes down, like "Listen to the Children" I wrote, and the one I was just mentioning "This World". Then I have "You Can Write Yourself a Rainbow", "Color us Love", "Get the L out of God". Then, I'm trying to think — oh, "Living in the Shadow of Somebody". If I get these happening, and "Keep Your Spirit Singing" — that's a good one. I don't care about anything after that.

Q: Well, we will.

Ennis: [Laughter] Yeah, whatever. If I get those out, I'll be a happy spirit, I'll be a happy soul, and I wouldn't care about recording after that. But like you said, you might want to hear more.

Q: I think we will. Well, you've had so many wonderful experiences. If you had to look back and grasp one aspect of your career, and you've done so many things, my goodness, could you choose?

Ennis: One that stands out? No, because I think everything makes up one, you know? One is just as important as the other. To tell you the truth, for us to be sitting here talking.

Q: That's right. Well, we have loved your music. What a gift!

Ennis: Yes, and I treat it as a gift. I always remembered that, and I didn't want to abuse it. You know, the beckoning call: Come on do this, come on. If you want to be a star, you got to do this and be there and talk to this person. Oh man, the directions they want you to adhere to to be a star.

Q: Well, it takes a lot of courage to hold your ground.

Ennis: Right. It's almost like they paint — it's almost like blinders. You know? This is what I can do when you know there's much, much, much more. But they don't want to wait for that much, much more. They're just right there to grab it and go.

Q: Well, if you were going back to Booker T. Washington —

Ennis: Oh my goodness.

Q: —Junior High School, and there was a young singer there who came up to you to ask for your advice, what would you tell them?

Ennis: Okay. A young singer. First I would ask why do you want to sing. Probably I would ask why. If it's to become famous or to make a lot of money, I wouldn't have too much to say to that person. If it is because they felt that they must sing because they like it, and they have something that they really want to say through music, and they love the music, then I would just tell that

person to be as truthful to themselves as possible. And I've said this so many times, not to look for fame and fortune. If you have the talent, you'll have enough fame and fortune. It'll find you. You don't have to go and search.

I find that when you're true to yourself, then you realize that you're given all that you need. I don't know if that young person can understand that. Especially today, because the entertainment world — I'm so glad I'm not fighting in that world. I mean, I didn't fight in it twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years ago. Today, I'm so glad I'm not really a part of it. Even the producers and publicists I talk to say, Ethel, it's just terrible. I don't know why they're in it. But the business has gotten so terrible, so bad.

The person just has to be true to herself — or himself — whoever comes up. Just be true to yourself, whatever you want to do. You want to sing, you want to play, you want to cook, whatever. And it's funny to say — to know that you're blessed. But that's the truth.

END OF SESSION